



# BRIEFING

## Global International Migrant Stock: The UK in International Comparison

AUTHOR: DR CARLOS VARGAS-SILVA  
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This briefing uses data from the United Nations Population Division (UNPD) World Migration Stock Estimates from 1990 to 2013, to provide an overview of the global stock of international migrants, including refugees, and to compare the UK to other countries and world regions.

## Key points

The global stock of international migrants was around 231 million in 2013, representing 3% of the world's population. The migrant share of the global population has remained at 3% over the past several decades.

There were about 7.8 million foreign-born persons in the UK in 2013. The UK occupies sixth place in the world in terms of total international migrants, just behind the USA, Russia, Germany, Saudi Arabia and Canada.

The share of international migrants in the UK population (about 12.4%) is above the European level (9.8%).

The UK occupies 17th place in terms of the gross number of international refugees globally, and when measuring refugees as a share of the population, the UK is above the European level. There are, however, difficulties related to comparisons of the stock of international refugees across countries.

The UK has a larger ratio of female to male migrants than most OECD countries, Africa, Asia, Northern America and Latin America, but lower than Europe as a whole.

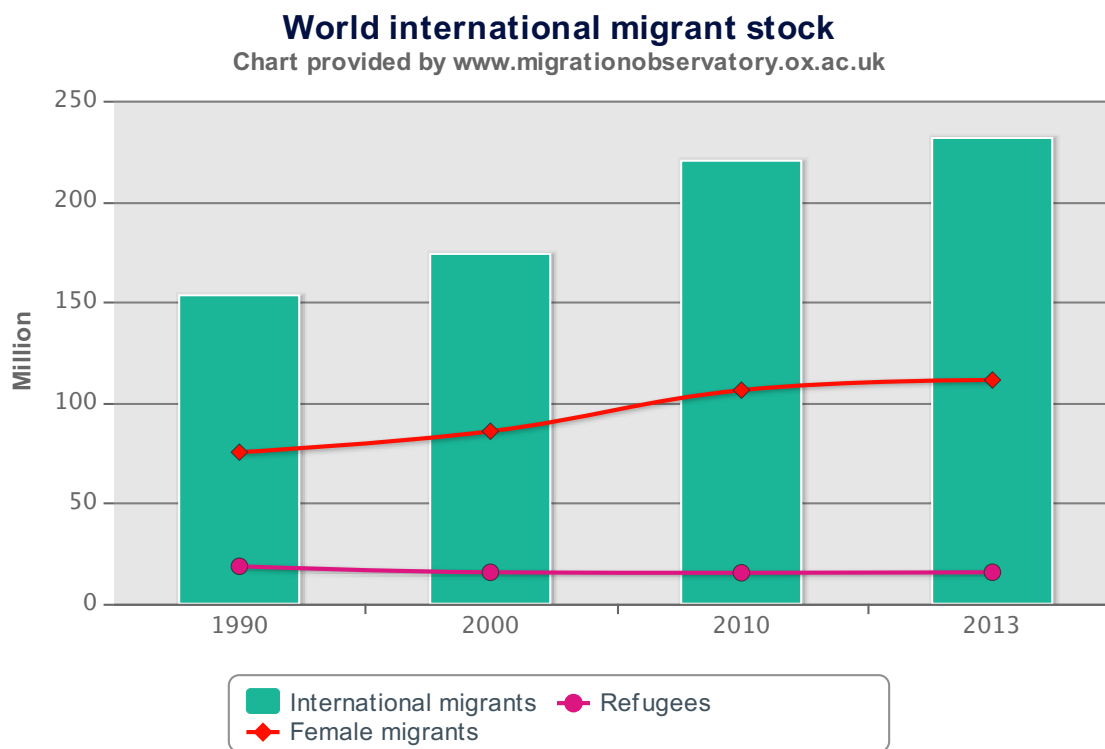
## Understanding the evidence

The UNPD data provide the stock of international migrants in each country across time; currently, data are available for 1990, 2000, 2010 and 2013 for 232 countries. The main sources of information are the population censuses of individual countries. In some instances, the data come from population registers and nationally representative surveys. In most cases the definition of the stock of international migrants is the stock of foreign-born residents (close to 80% of countries), but the stock of foreign-nationals is used for some countries (close to 20% of countries). In order to obtain estimates across years, UNPD applies methods of interpolation and extrapolation. At the time of publication, 2013 figures were based on extrapolations or projections from the 2010 census round and other data sources. The figures provided are mid-year estimates (as of 1 July of the years indicated).

## As of 2013, global international migrant stock exceeds 230 million; the UK occupies fifth place in the world

The global stock of international migrants increased by 50% from 156 million in 1990 to 231 million in 2013. This represents 3% of the world's population in 2013 and the migrant share of the global population has remained stable at 3% over the past several decades. Females represent just under half (48% in 2013) of the migrants around the world, a share that has been relatively stable over time (see Figure 1). About 7% of international migrants were refugees in 2013, a share that has decreased slightly over time. Refugees represented about 12% of global international migrants in 1990.

Figure 1

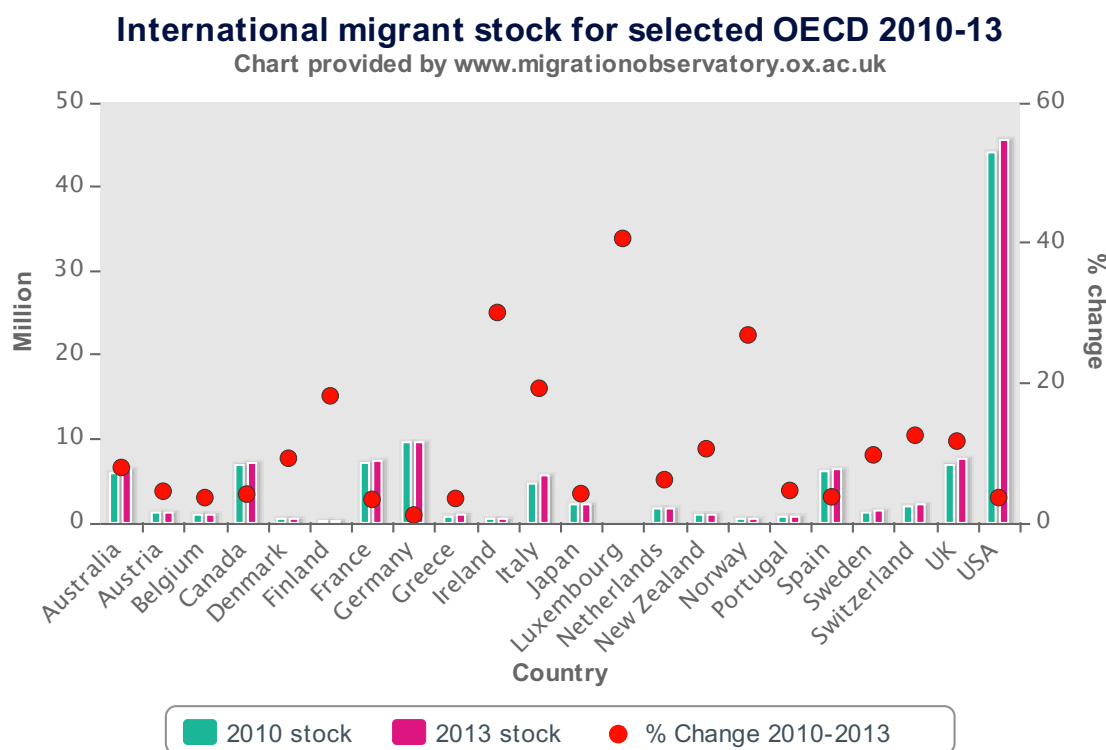


Source : United Nations Population Division Trends in International Migrant Stock. 2013.

Figure 2 shows the stock of international migrants in 2010 and 2013 for a selected group of OECD countries along with the percentage change in migrant stock between 2010 and 2013. In the rest of the discussion in this briefing, the figures for the OECD countries refer to those selected countries in Figure 2. Note that the estimates exclude some of the 33 country members (e.g. developing country members and eastern European countries) with migration patterns that are different from the majority of OECD countries.

The selected OECD countries hosted over 113 million international migrants in total in 2013. The UK has the third highest stock of migrants among this group after the USA and Germany, with 7.8 million international migrants in 2013. At the same time, the increase in the stock between 2010 and 2013 for the UK was about average compared to the other selected OECD countries, with a 12% increase in international migrant stocks, from about 7 million in 2010.

Figure 2



Source : United Nations Population Division Trends in International Migrant Stock. 2013.

The highest percentage increase (41%) in the migrant stock between 2010 and 2013 occurred for Luxembourg. However, given the total population of Luxembourg, this represents a relatively low numerical increase of 66,000 international migrants. Despite being average in terms of the percentage increase in the number of international migrants, numerically the UK experienced the third largest numerical increase of 819,000 migrants.

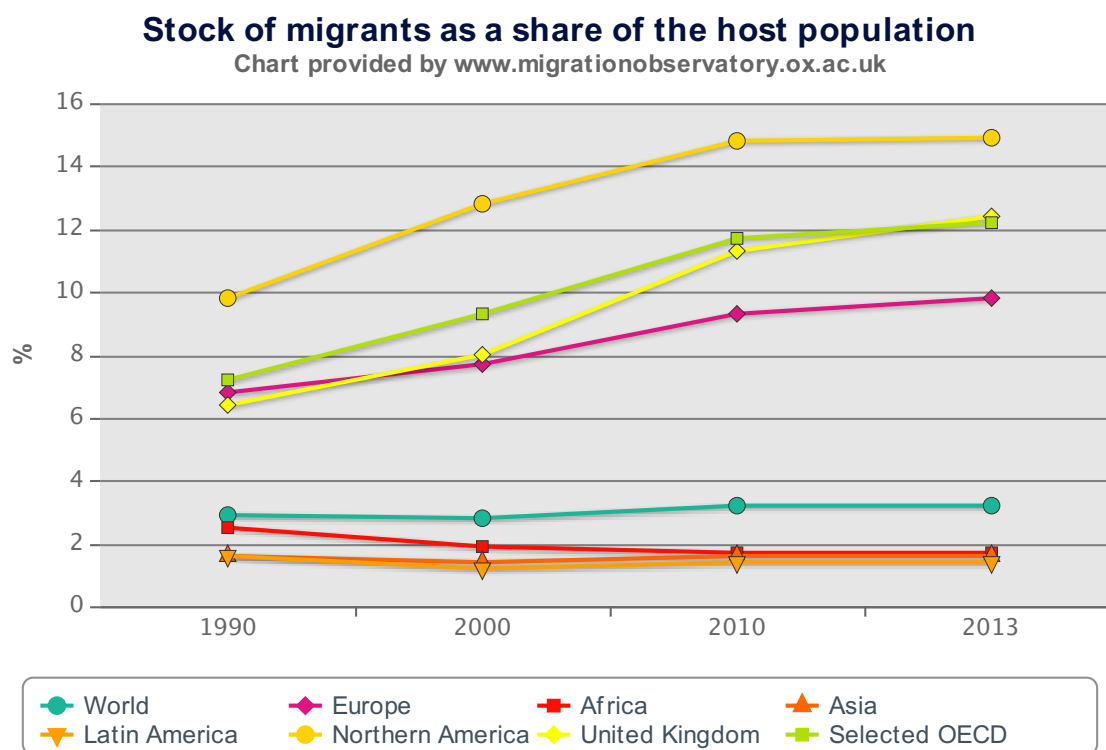
The UK occupies sixth place in the world in terms of the international migrant stock (using 2013 stock estimates). Three OECD countries (USA, Germany and Canada) as well as Russia and Saudi Arabia have a larger migrant stock than the UK. This position, however, represents a move up in the rankings from seventh position in 2010 and ninth position in 2000. The UK has been a top-ten country in terms of absolute migrant numbers at least since 1995.

**Migrant share in the UK population (about 12.4%) is above European levels (9.8%)**

The global population increased from 5.3 billion people in 1990 to more than 7 billion people in 2013. This means that, despite the increase in the global number of migrants, the share of migrants in the world population has remained very stable at about 3%.

Nonetheless, there are interesting dynamics for specific regions and countries (see Figure 3). Northern America (as defined by the UN which includes Bermuda, Canada, Greenland, Saint Pierre and Miquelon and USA) the OECD countries in Figure 2, Europe and the UK have experienced an increase in the stock of migrants as a share of the population. The shares for Northern America and the selected OECD countries have been consistently higher than the share of the UK population, but there has been some catching up during the last decade. Meanwhile, the migrant share in the UK population has surpassed that of Europe as a whole in recent years. It has also caught up with the migrant share (12.2%) of the select OECD countries as of 2013.

Figure 3



Source : United Nations Population Division Trends in International Migrant Stock. 2013.

A comparison of the migrants shares of the population between the UK and the five countries that had a larger migrant stock in 2010 (see information in previous section), suggests that the UK has a smaller migrant share of the population than Saudi Arabia, Canada and the USA, but a higher share than Germany and Russia. While the relative global standing of the UK in terms of migrants as a share of the population has increased over time, the UK remains in the middle of the global rankings. For further discussion of the migrant share of the UK population see the briefing on ‘Migrants in the UK: An Overview’.

**The UK ranks third in Europe in terms of the number of international refugees (just under 200,000) but ninth in Europe in international refugees relative to total population (close to 0.3%)**

It is difficult to estimate the global stock of international refugees. Many countries (especially developing countries) do not allow refugees to become ‘regular’ migrants or acquire citizenship, and therefore the estimates do reflect the stock of refugees over time. Other countries, however, allow refugees to change status, hence, the estimates are likely to underestimate the true stock of refugees.

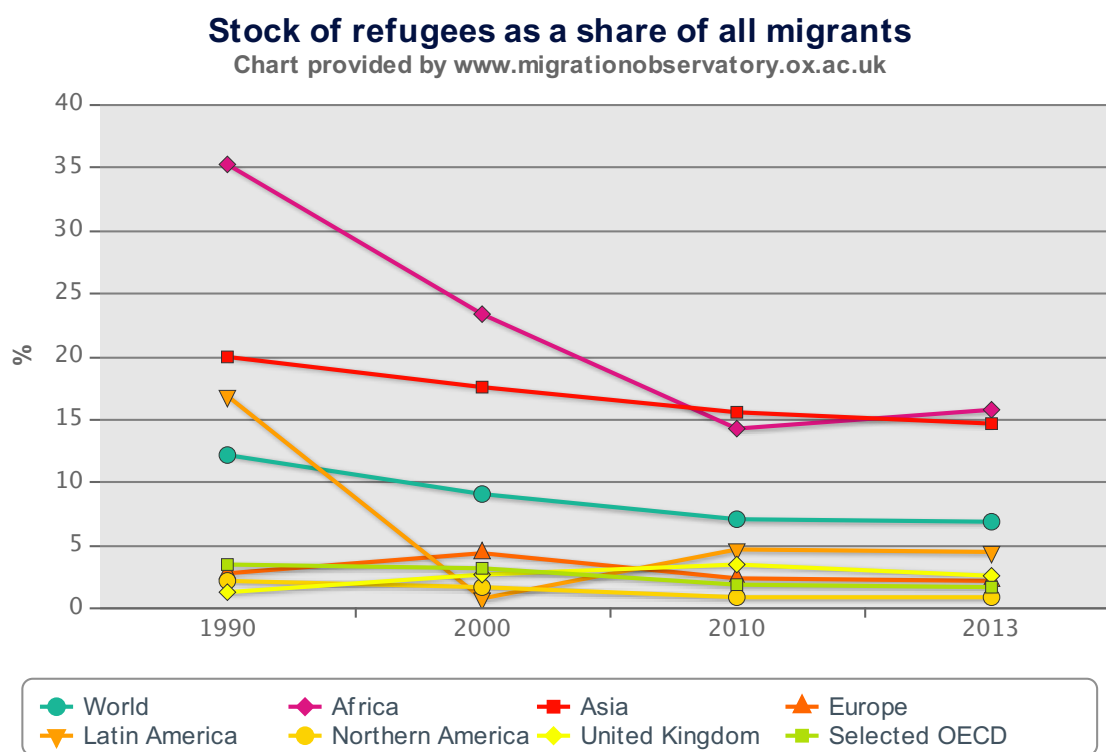
Estimates suggest that there were about 15.7 million international refugees in 2013 globally, up from 14.4 million in 2010. Since 1990, however, the global stock of international refugees has decreased. Yet there are important differences across regions and countries. Asia is the leading region of the world in the number of international refugees (with 10.4 million refugees in 2013 representing 66% of the global stock), followed by Africa (19%). About two-thirds of the refugees in Asia are in Western Asia and about one-third in Southern Asia.

Europe experienced a sharp increase in refugees until the mid-1990s, but this number has decreased in 2013 to about 1.5 million, down from about 3 million in 1995. The increase in refugees in Europe during the early 1990s is likely to have been due to flows that resulted from the breakdown of the Soviet Union (Hatton 2009). International refugees constituted less than 7% of the global stock of international migrants in 2013, down from

12% in 1990. Refugees represented about 2.5% of all international migrants in the UK during 2013 (see Figure 4), a share that is lower than for Europe, Latin America and Africa and Asia, but higher than for the selected OECD countries and Northern America. In some countries such as Syria, Jordan and Char, refugees constitute over 80% of all migrants in 2013. The refugee share of all migrants in the UK has a positive trend over time, although it decreased somewhat from 2010 to 2013. The number of refugees as a share of all migrants also decreased in Europe and the selected OECD countries for this period.

Considering refugees as a share of the total population, the UK share (close to 0.3%) is slightly above the levels for the selected OECD countries and Europe. In 2013, UK's 194,000 refugees accounted for 13% of the refugees in Europe (and 10% in the selected OECD countries), while having only 9% of Europe's total population (and 7% of the population of the selected OECD countries). Only two European countries (France and Germany) have more international refugees than the UK. With about 572,000 refugees, Germany has almost triple the number of refugees than the UK, while France only has a few more refugees with 210,000 compared to England's 194,000 in 2013.

Figure 4



Source : United Nations Population Division Trends in International Migrant Stock. 2013.

In terms of the global ranking for 2013, the UK occupied 17th place in terms of the number of international refugees. Out of the nine countries above the UK, five are in the Middle East (Jordan, State of Palestine, Syria, Iran and Lebanon) and only two are OECD countries (Germany and USA). Yet the UK is not a world leader in terms of refugees as a share of the population and the estimates for 2013 suggest that the country is in the middle of the global rankings.

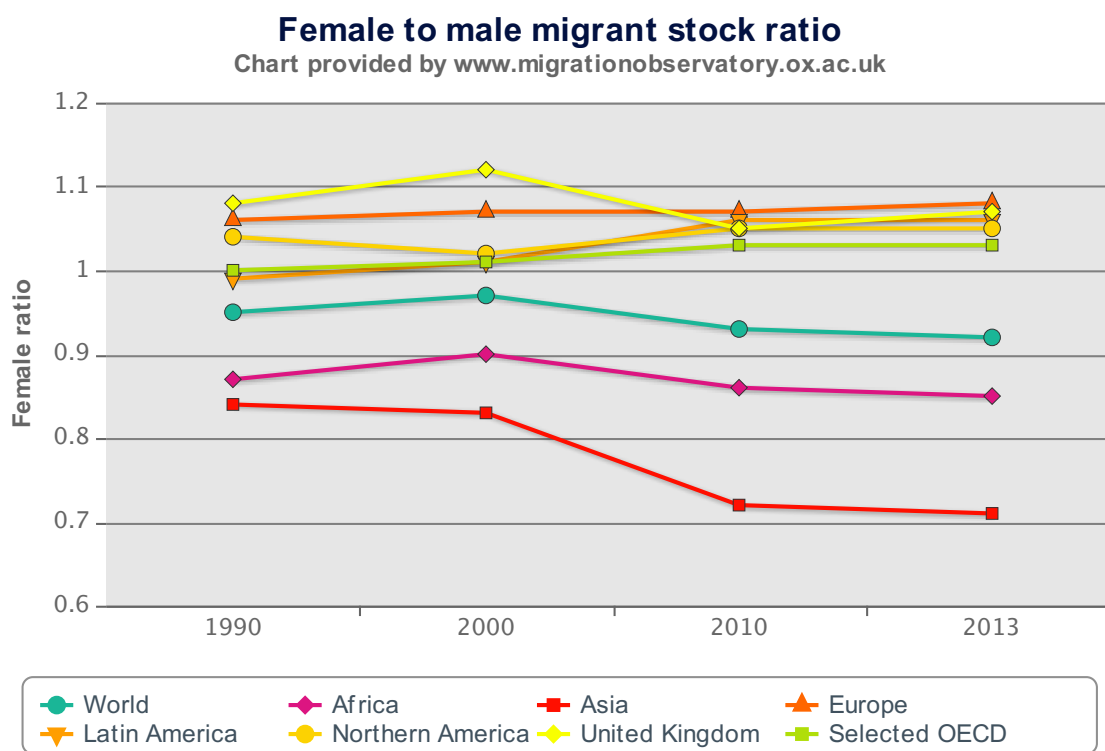
**The UK has a larger ratio of female to male migrants than most OECD countries, Europe, Africa, Asia, Northern America and Latin America**

Figure 5 shows the ratio of males to females among migrants. At the global level, male migrants outnumber female migrants but this is not the case in several of the regions/groups presented in Figure 5. Since 1990 at least, the

UK has had a larger than average female share within the migrant population. In 2013, the female to male ratio stood at 1.07 (suggesting that for every 100 male migrants, there are 107 female migrants). This is higher than the averages for most world regions; however, it is slightly lower than the female-male ratio for Europe as a whole (1.08). The UNPD data also suggests that the ratio of female to male migrants seems to be particularly high in Eastern European countries. However, the UK has a higher ratio than most other European countries.

The UK is the fourth country in the world in terms of the absolute stock of female migrants (behind the USA, Russia and Germany), up from the sixth place in 2010 and 11th place in 1990.

Figure 5



Source : United Nations Population Division Trends in International Migrant Stock. 2008.

### Evidence gaps and limitations

In countries where international refugees typically integrate into the population (mostly developed countries), the majority of refugees are counted by the population census. However, in many places refugees reside in camps and the census may fail to count refugees in these cases. The estimates from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are the main source of information on the number of international refugees in these countries, and these estimates include people in refugee-like situations (even if not recognized as refugees). See UNPD (2013) for further details.

The UNPD dataset allows for international comparisons but the comparison across countries is less than perfect. The factors that can make international comparisons problematic include differences in data collection practices between countries, the changing nature of borders and political/economic unions, irregular immigration and varying degrees of naturalization of the foreign-born. Finally, stock estimates include migrations from some considerable time ago and do not capture the current patterns of migration, but the cumulative effects over the years. While recognizing these limitations, this dataset remains the most useful and most widely used in international comparisons of migrant stocks (Skeldon 2011).

## References

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- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division. *Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2008 Revision CD-Rom Documentation*. New York: United Nations, 2009.

## Further reading

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- Ratha, D. and W. Shaw. "South-South Migration and Remittances." World Bank Working Paper, World Bank, Washington DC, 2007.
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## Related material

- Migration Observatory briefing – Migrants in the UK: An Overview [www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/migrants-uk-overview](http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/migrants-uk-overview)

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## The Migration Observatory

Based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, the Migration Observatory provides independent, authoritative, evidence-based analysis of data on migration and migrants in the UK, to inform media, public and policy debates, and to generate high quality research on international migration and public policy issues. The Observatory's analysis involves experts from a wide range of disciplines and departments at the University of Oxford.



## COMPAS

The Migration Observatory is based at the ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. The mission of COMPAS is to conduct high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform policy-making and public debate, and engage users of research within the field of migration.

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## About the author

Dr Carlos Vargas-Silva  
Senior Researcher, COMPAS  
[carlos.vargas-silva@compas.ox.ac.uk](mailto:carlos.vargas-silva@compas.ox.ac.uk)

## Press contact

Rob McNeil  
Head of Media and Communications  
[robert.mcneil@compas.ox.ac.uk](mailto:robert.mcneil@compas.ox.ac.uk)  
+ 44 (0)1865 274568  
+ 44 (0)7500 970081

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